

CLAIMS

What is claimed is:

1. A system for supplying packaging cushions manufactured from cushion feedstock, the system comprising:

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a lift;

a cushion-supply machine moveably supported by the lift; and

a hopper defining:

an entrance opening for receiving packaging cushions from the cushion-supply machine into the hopper; and

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an exit opening for withdrawing cushions from the hopper, wherein:

the elevation of the hopper entrance opening is higher than the elevation of the hopper exit opening;

the cushion-supply machine is capable of manufacturing packaging cushions from cushion feedstock;

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the cushion-supply machine defines a cushion outlet; and

the lift is adapted to move the cushion-supply machine between:

a supply position, in which the elevation of the cushion outlet is higher than the elevation of the hopper entrance opening; and

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a reload position, in which the elevation of the cushion-supply machine cushion outlet is lower than the elevation of the hopper entrance opening.

2. The system of claim 1 wherein the cushion-supply machine is adapted to manufacture a string of cushions.

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3. The system of claim 1 wherein:

the cushion-supply machine further comprises a feedstock holder adapted to support an inventory of cushion feedstock for manufacture into packaging cushions; and

in the reload position the feedstock holder is manually accessible from ground level to replenish the inventory of cushion feedstock.

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4. The system of claim 3 wherein in the reload position the feedstock holder is less than about 7 feet above ground level.

5. The system of claim 1 wherein the elevation of the cushion outlet in the reload position is at least about 5 feet lower than the elevation of the cushion outlet in the supply position.

6. The system of claim 1 wherein in the reload position, the elevation of the cushion outlet is below the elevation of the hopper exit opening.

7. The system of claim 1 further comprising a blower downstream from the cushion outlet of the cushion-supply machine and upstream from the hopper entrance opening, wherein the blower is adapted to provide an airflow to assist movement of the packaging cushions from the cushion outlet to the hopper entrance opening.

8. The system of claim 7 further comprising an unenclosed flow path for the cushions from the cushion outlet of the cushion-supply machine to the hopper entrance opening.

9. The system of claim 1 wherein the lift comprises a jackscrew lift.

10. The system of claim 1 wherein the lift comprises:
a tower frame;
a screw rotatably supported by the tower frame;
a platform supporting the cushion-supply machine, wherein the platform engages the screw and is adapted so that rotation of the screw in a first direction causes the platform to rise and rotation of the screw in a second direction opposite the first direction causes the platform to lower.

11. The system of claim 10 further comprising a motor adapted to rotate the screw.

12. The system of claim 1 wherein the lift comprises:
a tower frame;
left and right screws rotatably supported by the tower frame;
a platform supporting the cushion-supply machine, wherein the platform engages
5 the left and right screws and is adapted so that rotation of the left and right screws in a first way
causes the platform to rise and rotation of the left and right screws in a second way opposite the
first way causes the platform to lower.
13. The system of claim 1 wherein the lift comprises a hoist lift.
- 10 14. The system of claim 1 wherein the lift comprises:
a tower frame;
a platform supporting the cushion-supply machine; and
a cable member moveably supported by the tower frame and engaging the
15 platform, wherein the cable member is adapted to raise the platform to place the cushion-supply
machine in the supply position and to lower the platform to place the cushion-supply machine in
the reload position.
15. The system of claim 1 wherein the lift comprises a hydraulic lift.
- 20 16. The system of claim 1 wherein the hopper exit opening is at least about 3 feet
above ground level.
17. The system of claim 1 wherein the hopper is at least partially supported by the lift.
- 25 18. The system of claim 1 wherein the hopper is completely supported by the lift.
19. The system of claim 1 further comprising a packing station under the hopper.
- 30 20. The system of claim 1 further comprising a conveyor under the hopper.

21. The system of claim 1 wherein the lift comprises one or more receptacles adapted to receive a member selected from a fork of a forklift and a leg of a pallet jack.

5 22. A method of providing packaging cushions utilizing the system of claim 1, the method comprising in sequence:

activating the lift to place the cushion-supply machine in the reload position;

loading the cushion-supply machine with cushion feedstock;

activating the lift to place the cushion-supply machine in the supply position; and

10 starting the cushion-supply machine to manufacture packaging cushions into the hopper.

23. The method of claim 22 wherein the loading step is accomplished by a person standing on ground level.

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24. The method of claim 22 wherein the cushion-supply machine manufactures a string of packaging cushions into the hopper.